



2004 WEST NILE VIRUS SEASON EXPECTED TO BE MOST SEVERE YEAR YET, NEW REPORT FINDS SHORTFALLS IN RESPONSE TO HEALTH THREAT

Report Raises Serious Concerns About Emerging Infectious Disease Strategies

Contacts: Laura Segal (202) 223-9870 x 278 or lsegal@tfah.org or Michael Earls (202) 223-9870 x 273 or mearls@tfah.org

Washington, DC, July 1, 2004 – With the 2004 season of West Nile virus (WNV) expected to be the most severe since its discovery in the U.S. in 1999, a new report released today by Trust for America's Health (TFAH) finds that the spread of the virus raises serious public health concerns and demonstrates the need for a shift in America's approach to emerging infectious diseases. This is the first year that WNV is likely to significantly impact the nation coast-to-coast.

"West Nile is now well established in America," said Louis W. Sullivan, MD, Former Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. "Unpredictability is the only thing predictable about new infectious diseases. The quick emergence and spread of West Nile is a reminder that we must proactively plan for the unexpected."

The report concludes that top concerns posed by WNV this year include how to most effectively :

- Protect the most "at-risk" people such as senior citizens and people with compromised immune systems,
- Investigate the possible link between WNV and birth defects,
- Evaluate the risk/benefit of mosquito-reduction strategies,
- Encourage private industry and/or government to speed development of a human vaccine for WNV, and
- Diminish the hazard WNV poses to nationwide blood banks.

Shortcomings in responding to the virus in prior years contributed to the spread and have hindered the containment and control of the disease, according to the study. The problems with the WNV response efforts highlight systemic problems in the country's emerging infectious disease management strategies:

- Breakdowns in communication between government agencies and the human medical and veterinary communities hindered both identification of the virus and containment efforts in 1999 when the virus was initially discovered.
- The lack of "surge capacity" and emergency contingency planning to respond to the unanticipated rapid and virulent spread of the disease left health agencies without enough resources or flexibility to respond adequately. Additionally, budget cuts in over two-thirds of states in 2002-03 adversely impacted many health departments' abilities to combat the virus.
- Reagent shortages in 2003 meant many state laboratories were without materials needed to test WNV as it spread faster than predicted. Many state and local labs also did not have enough equipment, trained staff, and funds to respond efficiently and effectively to the WNV threat.

“West Nile virus can be seen as a harbinger of things to come,” said Allan Rosenfield, MD, Dean of the Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University. “If we better prepared our public health system with the trained workforce, technology, and contingency planning and flexibility it needs, we will do a better job of protecting the public from the next deadly disease we encounter.”

“The shortcomings identified in the fight against West Nile virus demonstrate that there are steps we could take to avoid the current default policy of scrambling to respond after a new disease emerges and realize that proactive planning is the best repellent money can buy,” said Shelley A. Hearne, DrPH, Executive Director of Trust for America’s Health (TFAH).

The TFAH report recommends several strategies for effective future containment of WNV and better readiness for future emerging infectious diseases:

- Public education campaigns on ways individuals and communities can protect themselves need to be greatly expanded.
- A stronger, coordinated national emerging infectious disease response action plan focused on containing and reducing new and growing diseases needs greater emphasis. This should include allowing for greater contingency planning and rapid response capabilities, improved disease tracking, and upgrading laboratory testing technology and expertise.

The report is available on TFAH’s Web site at www.healthyamericans.org

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Trust for America’s Health is a non-profit, non-partisan organization dedicated to saving lives by protecting the health of every community and working to make disease prevention a national priority. www.healthyamericans.org